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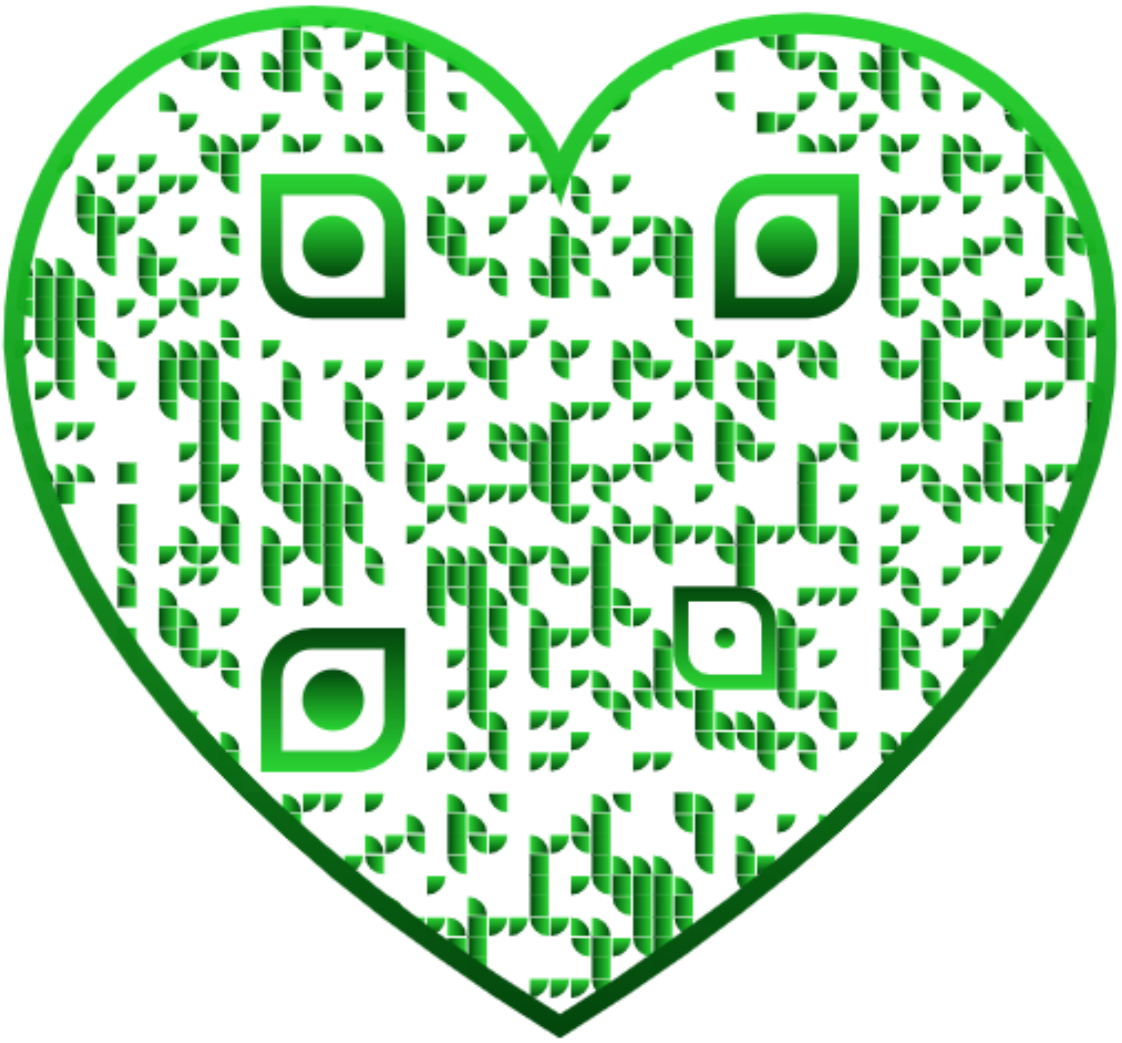


Puttin' the Breaks on the Blues

Saucy Starts and Flashy Finishes For Your 12-Bar Binges

Few licks are more satisfying to play than fat, juicy blues turnarounds. These gratifying cadences please your ears and soothe your soul. But of all the turnarounds you play, are any more important—or more high profile—than those that open or close your songs? ■ To start a song, you will be called upon to ignite the groove with an engaging guitar intro. At the end of a guitar-driven blues tune, the band will typically break with a big crack of the snare drum—*pow!*—and you'll have two or three seconds to pour your heart out with a closing cadenza. ➤ ➤ ➤

By Jude Gold

Illustration by Kelly Sutherland

You may even get a break thrown at you in the middle of a tune, allowing you to make a grand entrance into a guitar solo. Why not seize these moments? These are perfect opportunities for making huge musical statements—and when you have everybody's attention, nothing talks like a tricked-out blues turnaround hot-rodded to your liking.

Granted, there are plenty of classic Delta-, Chicago-, country-, and jazz-blues openers and closers that never fail. But as tireless as these workhorses are, great players tweak them to suit their own personal brands of blues. You can too. Building from phrases that have been in the blues vernacular for nearly 100 years, this lesson serves up a feast of daring turnarounds and licks you can use over blues breaks.

Cue Tips

A blues break is usually more a matter of instinct than design. You just *feel* it coming, and, hopefully, so do your bandmates. Cueing a break is easy, and, if you're ever stuck in a 12-bar jam that no one knows how to end, it's a useful skill to possess.

First, establish eye contact with your bandmates. Then, like a singer bringing down a raised arm to signal the end of the song, use the headstock of your guitar to conduct the break's downbeat. If your rhythm section has a shred of experience playing blues, they'll intuitively drop out for your cadenza.

The Breakdown on Breaks

• Blues breaks occur most often at the end of the very last 12-bar cycle—at either bar 9, 10, or 11. Fill them with the impassioned guitar cadenzas and/or dramatic turnarounds of your choice.

• Breaks in the middle of the song are less common, but they're a great way to launch big solos.

• Song openings call for captivating intro licks or engaging turnarounds—any lick that is strong enough to close a blues should be more than cool enough to open one.

• Before you "put on the breaks," be sure of the song's chord structure, because there are several different 12-bar blues forms. The most common is a *standard* blues, which is built off of I7, IV7, and V7 chords (or *G7*, *C7*, and *D7*, respectively, in the key of *G*). With commas as our bar lines, use this sequence: I7, IV7, I7, I7, IV7, IV7, I7, I7, V7, IV7, I7, V7.

A *minor* blues is built off a standard blues, but the chords are typically voiced as minor-7ths (*Gm7*, *Cm7*, and *Dm7*, again in the key of *G*), and the last four bars are often replaced with ♭VI7, V7, Im7, V7 (or *E♭7*, *D7*, *Gm7*, *D7*).

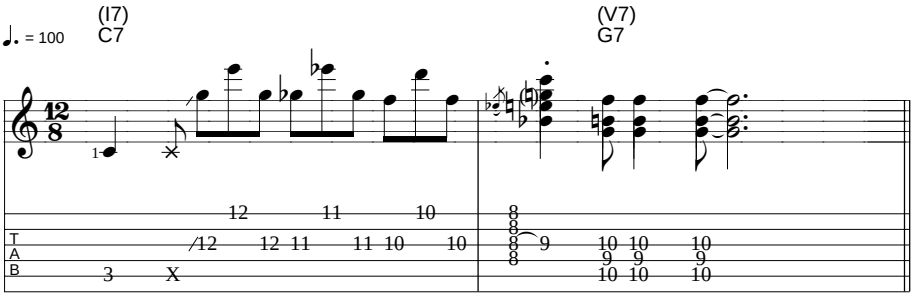
Finally, get a grip on *jazz* blues, which typically adds Vm7, IIIm7, VI7, and IIm7 voicings (or *Dm7*, *Bm7*, *E7*, and *Am7*, respectively). A swingin' jazz blues in *G* might go: *G7*, *C7*, *G7*, *Dm7 G7*, *C7*, *C7*, *G7*, *Bm7 E7*, *Am7*, *D7*, *Bm7 E7*, *Am7 D7*. (Note that some bars contain two chords, each strummed for two beats).

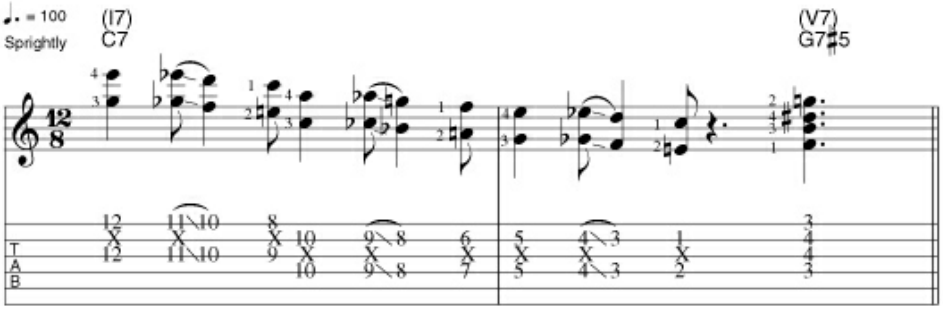
• There is no true schematic for the blues. As blues greats from Robert Johnson to ZZ Top have proved over the decades, you don't *have* to stick to the 12-bar form. You've just got to have a bona fide case of the blues. —JG

Break-ing with Tradition

The magic of the 12-bar blues turnaround lies in its supernatural ability to simultaneously offer harmonic closure and rebirth. This is why most turnarounds are as useful for *opening* blues tunes as they are for ending them. To get rolling, check out the classic Chicago-blues turnaround in **Ex. 1a**. It's one of the world's favorite blues closers—or is it an opener? Indeed, it works equally well as either. It's just one of the many vintage turnarounds we'll use to construct spectacular new starts and stops for blues grooves. Let the fun begin.

Ex. 1a



Ex. 1b

Opening Statements

Let's use the basic grips from Ex. 1a to construct an exhilarating descent that lands with both feet firmly in the blues—and turns a few heads in the process (**Ex. 1b**). Once you get the moves under your fingers, this topsy-turvy opener all but plays itself. We're playing sixths all the way down, so try to mute the unused string between each pair of notes with the underside of the fretting-hand finger on the lower string. Then, you can really lean into this riff and play it like you mean it. Anything less just ain't the blues.

As with all of this lesson's musical examples,

"I want to be able to play anything I want to play." — Robben Ford, Oct. '76, *GP*

the double bar line indicates either the beginning of the first 12-bar cycle (where the band joins you), or—if you're using the turnaround as an outro—the end of the very last 12 bars. Riffs such as Ex. 1b—blues flourishes that take place over the I7 chord—also make nice springboards over two-bar breaks beginning at bar 3 of the cycle.

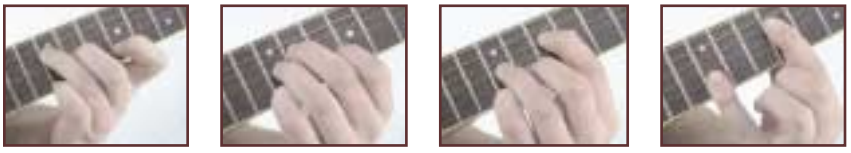
For our next powerhouse intro, try **Ex. 2**, a turbo-charged Texas turnaround played Stevie Ray Vaughan-style. If you're with a band, big snare hits on beat one of the first two bars will punctuate your entrance. The lick has two parts: the opening single-note *B7* line (repeated again a whole-step down over *A7*), and the meaty chordal tag at the end. Did you catch the counterpoint in those chords? Starting at *E9*, there's a classic Delta-blues descent on the fourth string harmonized by a rising line on the second string. To use this lick as a song-closing break, start it at bar 9 of the last cycle.

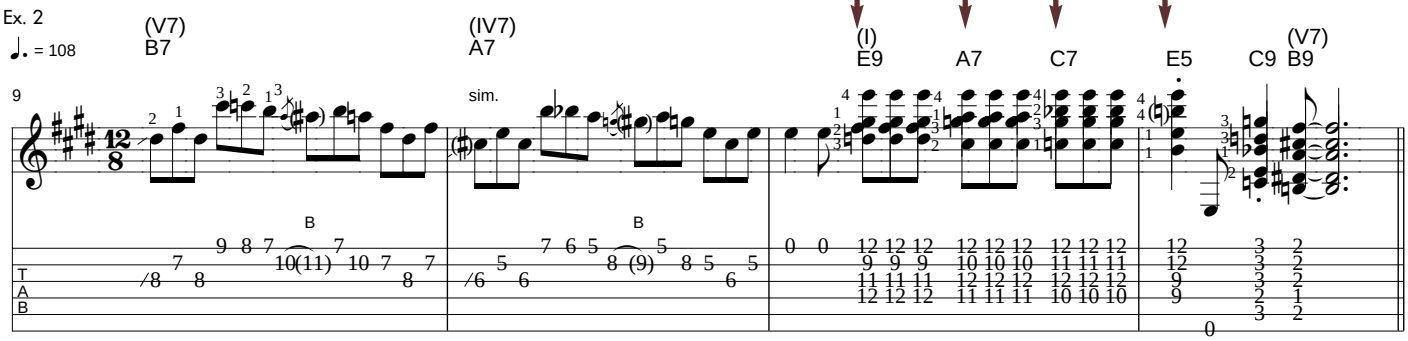
The Gift of Grab

It's also important to steal inspiration from other instrumentalists' blues-break maneuvers. When it comes to big, chordal moves, pianists—with their ten fingers and 88 keys—have us beat, but we can still play wide-load grips inspired by them. Keyboardist Ray Charles might start off a slow blues in *A* with posh chords such as those in **Ex. 3**. This ascent makes a majestic opener, and it gets its magic from smooth voice leading. Dig how *D♯dim7* seamlessly connects *D* to *A/E*, and then *A/E* to *Esus*?

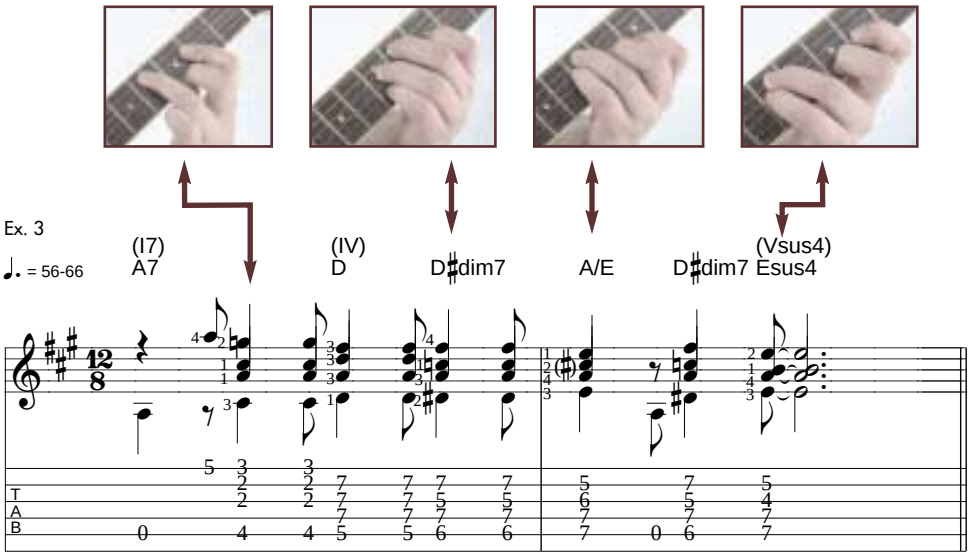
Let's rework this lick Larry Carlton-style. **Ex. 4** illustrates how the versatile guitarist might use similar diminished flavors over a slow blues. This is a showoff-y turnaround, but it's tasteful and bluesy to the core. A single-note line sets things up, leading us to the heart of the lick—the triple-*D♯dim7* slide on beat four of the opening measure.

Reminder: Diminished 7th chords don't require changes in fingerings when you re-voice them higher on the neck—just slide them upwards and stop every three frets! In fact, our fingering hardly changes when we hit *A7*. We simply move that last *D♯Dim7* up one fret and leave our first finger behind on the 7th fret. (Again, smooth voice leading results in pure ear candy.)

Ex. 4 also makes a captivating closer. A

Ex. 2



Ex. 3



ALL HAND SHOTS: PAUL HAGGARD

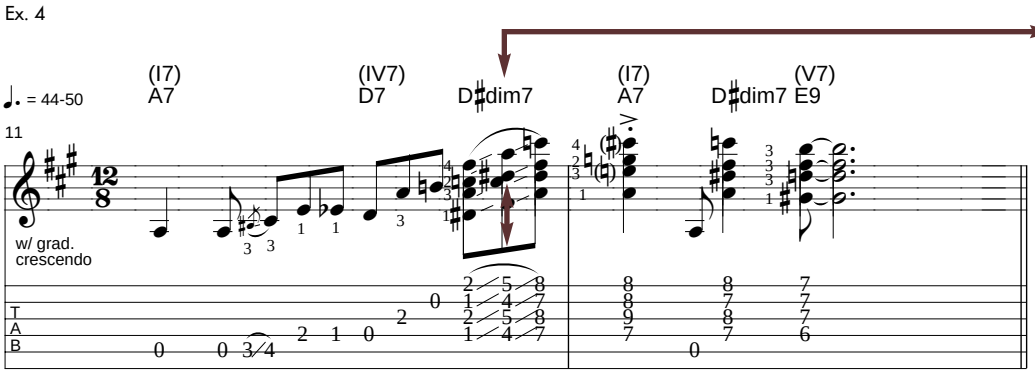
break at bar 11 gives you all the breathing room you'll need, and a Carlton-flavored half-dirty tone will help bring this lick to life. Using dynamics, see if you can start at a whisper and gradually swell to full crescendo by the time you hit the *A7* accent. The band will likely come back and nail the last two chords with you. (Because we are now *ending* our *A* blues, try closing with *B♭9* and *A9 instead of D♯dim7* and *E9*. This common ♭II7-I7 slide gives complete closure to a blues song.)

Minor Adjustments

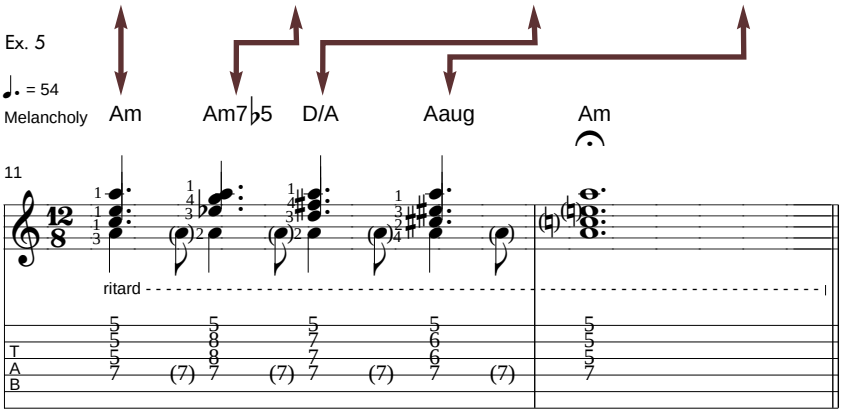
A minor blues' dark, moody changes call for a different brand of guitar break. For instance, try the four-note chords in **Ex. 5** for pure harmonic heartbreak. This is a moving way to close a slow, minor blues in *A*. These poignant voicings are more than enough to carry your slow-mo cadenza, because the stirring dissonance of *Am7♭5* and the curious major third in *Aaug* will have a mesmerizing effect on your audience. A gradual ritard from you—as well as a cymbal swell and low-*A* bass note on the last chord—will add finality.

For slightly faster minor-blues grooves, try a dazzler in the style of Mr. Guitar, Chet Atkins (**Ex. 6**). This break is the first one we've seen that starts at measure 10, and it startles you with a sudden diminished descent, but then smoothes things out with a chordal epilogue similar to Ex. 5. This time, however, our chord voicings have an open-string, high-*E* pedal, whereas Ex. 5 featured an enchanting dual-*A* pedal fretted on the outside strings.

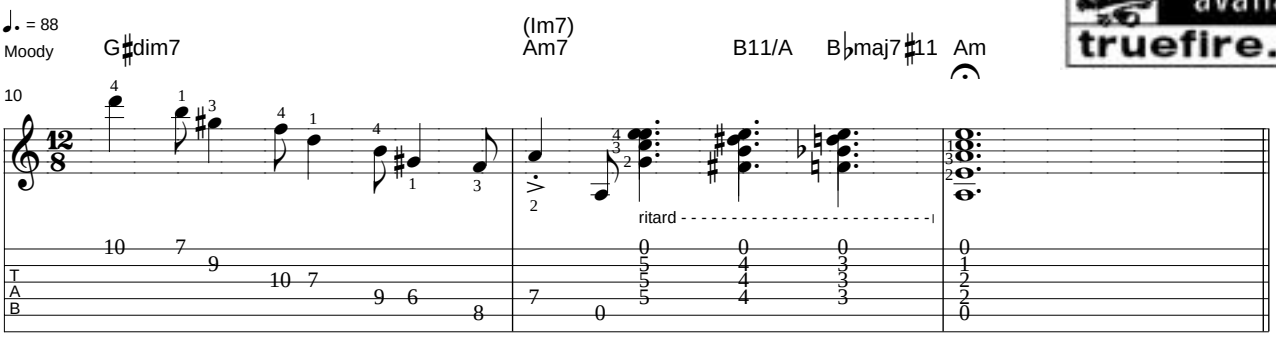
Ex. 4



Ex. 5



Ex. 6



Hot Country Blues

If you like hot-dogging on a Telecaster with a little slap-back echo, you'll love **Ex. 7**, which shows you how to inject country flavors into a blues cadenza. This lick is based on sixths, and it uses the open *D* string as a springboard throughout its opening measure. Try putting aside your pick in favor of a nice claw-grip attack, and pluck the low notes with your thumb, and the upper notes with your index or middle finger.

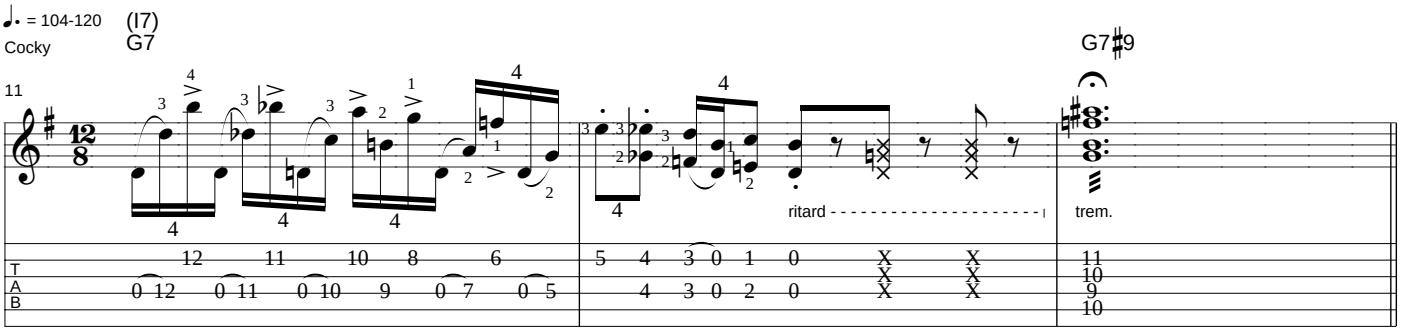
What is most striking is the riff's four-against-three vibe. Notice how the sixteenth-notes are written as quadruplets? That's because—like the rest of our examples—we're in a 12/8 blues. These four-note groupings would nestle perfectly against a two-step Nashville groove in 4/4, but against this shuffle beat they create splendid rhythmic friction. (One thing that helps you shift gears is that the band has, of course, dropped out for your break.) Dig into the big, crunchy, muted scrapes at the end, and then have the band come back in to pound that final *G7#9* with you.

A more rootsy—but still twangified—outro is **Ex. 8**. This break begins at measure 9 of an *E* blues, and it opens with some basic pentatonic moves. But it's the dirty diads that give this lick teeth—the counterpoint within the three double-stops absolutely nails the V7-IV7 shift. Try this as an intro, with big snare hits, as in Ex. 2.

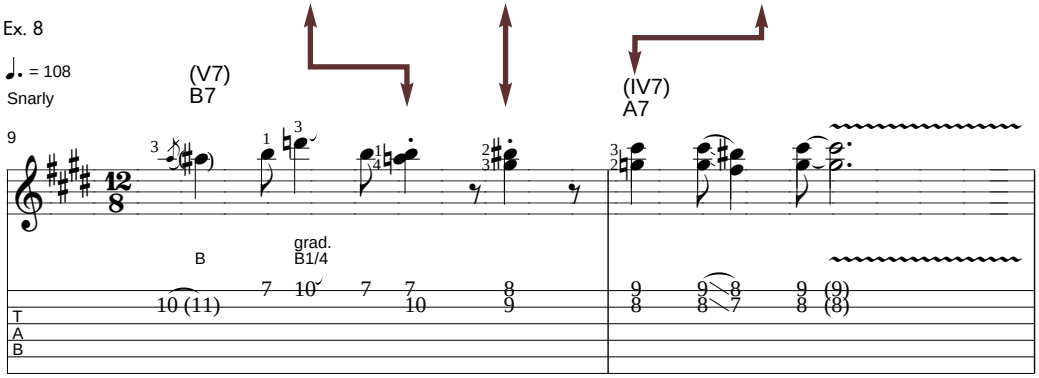
Top-notch Turnaround

What Ex. 8 needs is a tasty tag for the final two measures, such as **Ex. 9**—a modified Delta-blues turnaround approved by ZZ Top's Billy Gibbons. You'll recognize the notes, but Gibbons and other blues gurus prefer to give rhythmic independence to the two voices. The descending low voice has the typical 12/8 shuffle feel, while the upper high-*E* pedal is syncopated

Ex. 7



Ex. 8



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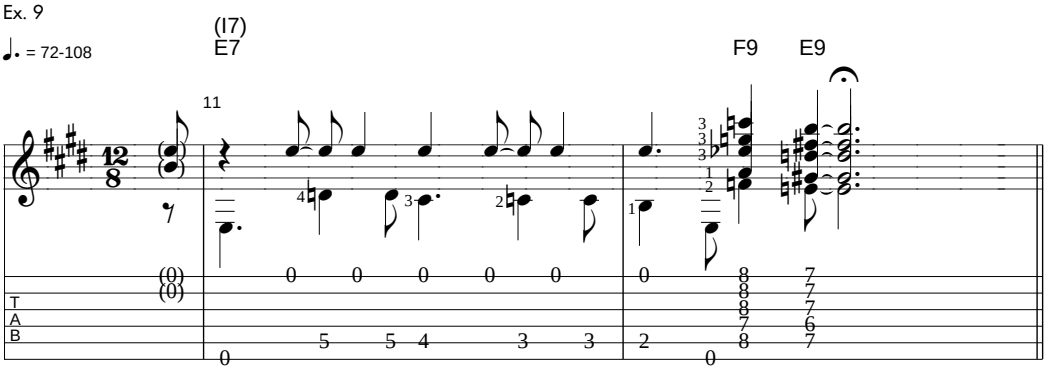
Ex. 9



"I've always liked the orchestration between keyboards and guitar, the way they work together."—Vinnie Moore, Jul. '88, *GP*

over the top. Pluck it fingerstyle or with your pick on the low notes and your middle or ring finger on the uppers. The voices only hit simultaneously on beat three of measure 11, and beat one of measure 12.

Once you have it down, try **Ex. 10**. Rhythmically, the mechanics are identical to those of Ex. 9, but we've relocated to the key of *G*, and made one exciting addition to the upper voice: a contrapuntal rising line on the *B* string, like the one we saw in the closing chords of Ex. 2.

Boppin' the Blues

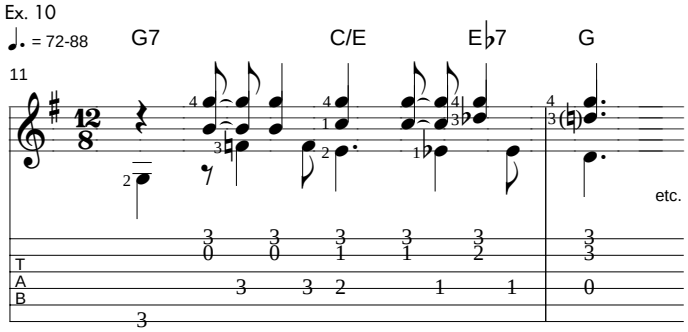
Swing-, bebop-, and some jump-blues progressions contain a shifting palette of chord tones that deliver harmonically exciting closing breaks. A fun way to handle these endings is by bringing out the unique flavors of each chord with a melodic improvisation or precrafted lick.

In an *F* bebop blues, the last four chords might be *F7*, *D7*, *Gm7*, and *C7♯5*, as in **Ex. 11**. First, play through these changes and soak your ears in their sound. Then, try the lick. You'll be the only instrument playing, but your listeners will still hear the chord progression because you're implying it with specific notes. For instance, the *F♯* and *A* at the end of the first phrase bring out *D7*, and the *G♯* at the end of bar 12 suggests the tasty sharped fifth in *C7♯5*. Close things out with the intriguing, unresolved sound of *F6/9♯11*.

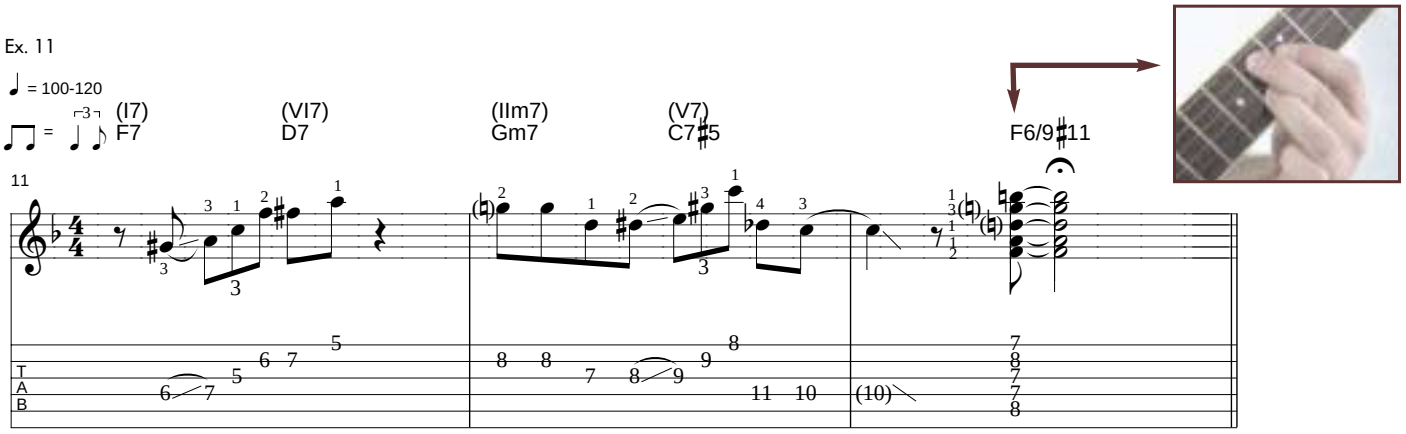
Finally, make sure you have a chord-melody cadenza in your 'bop-blues arsenal. **Ex. 12** is a great way to open—or close—a swingin' *C* blues. The grips are inspired by the legendary Joe Pass, and the descending melody echoes the late sax man Oliver Nelson and his jazz-blues classic, "Stolen Moments."

Don't be intimidated by all the ink in this example. Once you get the concept down, this lick is easy to learn. It's simply a series of descending minor-7th chords tied to a high *C* pedal tone—a *balloon* tone, if you will. As a bar-11 outro, this lick makes a great surprise break for two reasons: It blindsides you with chords that aren't typical of a 12-bar blues, and it prolongs the final cadence by two whole measures, making the final V7 resolution even more gratifying.

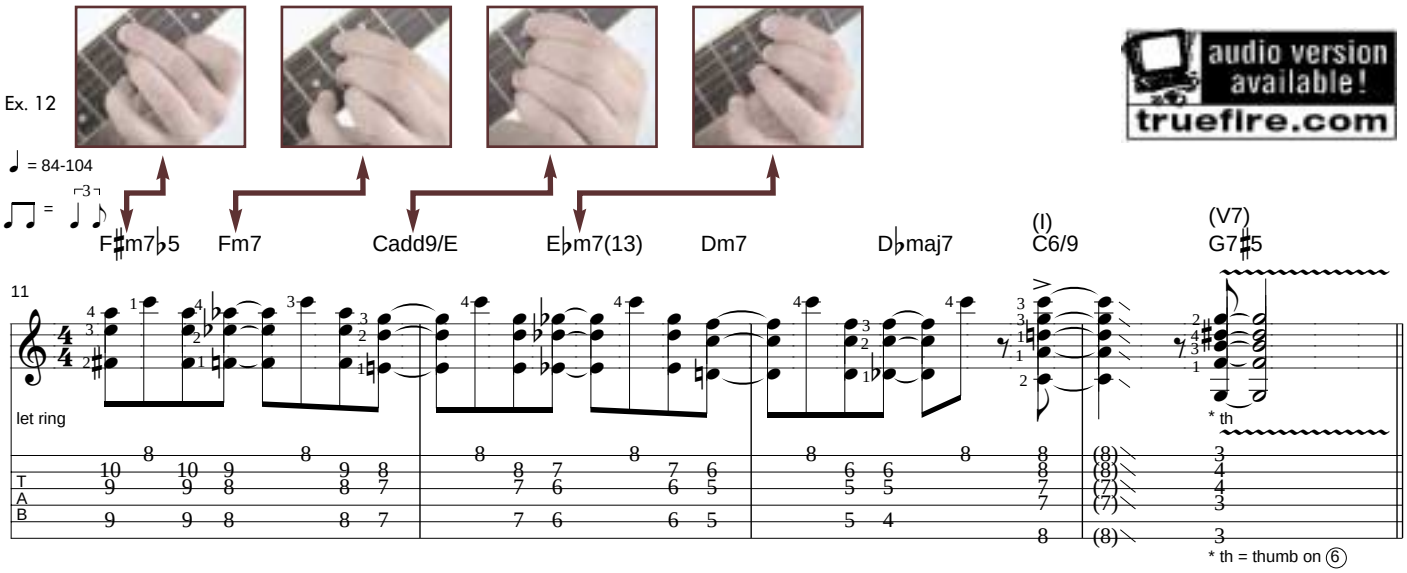
Ex. 10



Ex. 11



Ex. 12



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"The guitar is a real physical, visceral experience for me."— Robben Ford, Sept. '88, *GP*

Flashbacks

Once you have these intros and outros mastered, try some mixing and matching to develop trademark turnarounds you can call your own. For example, try grafting Ex. 2's stinging, single-note opening to Ex. 9's customized Delta descent. Or, because most of these moves are extremely portable, try transplanting Ex. 5's melancholy chords down to the key of *E* minor, where open strings will join the four-part choir. Or, throw colors from one genre at another. Who says you can't use Ex. 12's jazzy grips to shut down a rock blues?

Above all, get these moves not just into your fingertips, but up through your arms and into your chest. Find the ones that power your heart like fire in a furnace, and, when all eyes and ears are upon you, your breaks will be backed with undeniable conviction.